

Innovation *insights*

OFFICE OF PLANNING AND
Institutional Assessment

Innovation Insight Series Number 26
<http://www.psu.edu/president/pia/innovation/>

Positive Planning: Building Your Plan and Building Support from a Positive Base*

Many people assume that planning must begin with a SWOT analysis - Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats. This can be perceived as 'fixing what is broken or wrong'. There is a different method, from a positive perspective. Penn State's Office of Planning and Institutional Assessment has developed a Positive Planning approach that can generate a 'can do' climate and avoid the cynicism and jadedness that might result from initially focusing on prior problems within an organization. This Innovation Insight provides an overview of Penn State's *Positive Planning* approach.

A Positive Approach - The Background

Penn State's OPIA's *Positive Planning* approach incorporates components of *Appreciative Inquiry* and *Preferred Futuring* into a method that units can use to engage participants and develop a plan in a relatively short amount of time. All are alternatives to a traditional problem solving approach to planning.

Appreciative Inquiry (Hammond 1996 and Cooperrider, et. al. 2000) is based on the principle of looking for what works in an organization and using those strengths, skills, approaches, and tools as the basis for moving forward. There are four steps in what is referred to as the 4 D cycle: Discover, Dream, Design, and Destiny. The process begins with interviews throughout the organization using questions that explore past positively memorable performance in the organization. Data from those interviews is used to develop a "provocative proposition" for the future.

Preferred Futuring (Lippitt 1998) evolved from the approach of developing possible future scenarios and then planning to achieve a scenario that was preferred. It has eight steps, usually explored through small

group discussion, with the possibility of many small groups participating simultaneously:

1. Review History
2. Identify What's Working and What's Not
3. Identify Values and Beliefs
4. Identify Relevant Events, Developments, and Trends
5. Create a Preferred Future Vision
6. Translate Future Visions into Action Goals
7. Plan for Action
8. Create a Structure for Implementing the Plan

A Positive Planning Model

Positive Planning begins with participants identifying their organization's past strengths and accomplishments. It builds on the positive atmosphere this activity creates with a second interview-based activity that develops a description of the desired future organization. Participants then identify the components of that future organization and goals and strategies needed to reach it, prioritize the goals, and specify the action steps necessary to achieve those goals. The *Positive Planning* process works through the following

*This Innovation Insight is adapted from "Building Your Plan and Building Support from a Positive Base", presented by Marianne Guidos and Barbara Sherlock at the plenary session of the Society for College and University Planning Mid Atlantic Regional Conference, March 2-4, 2008.

activities and steps:

1. *Identify Accomplishments and Current Strengths*
2. *Describe the Desired Future*
3. *Prioritize Goals and Strategies*
4. *Develop Action Plans*

Step 1: Identify Accomplishments and Current Strengths

Positive Planning begins with pairs of individuals briefly interviewing each other and identifying:

1. accomplishments in the last few years, and
2. strengths in their organization and staff

An interview guide is provided to participants either as a handout or on a whiteboard or flip chart for all to see. Participants take notes during their interviews. After the interviews, each pair of interviewees shares their strengths and accomplishments round robin style, and the information is captured on chart paper. These lists are hung around the room for all to see.

Step 2: Describe the Desired Future

Interviews

After the strengths and accomplishments are identified, new pairs of individuals interview each other about their desired future. Typically, the pairs are provided with a written interview protocol that includes:

1. The amount of time (20 to 30 minutes) to spend on the questions and instructions on how to proceed through the questions.
2. A brief scenario set several years in the future in which the organization is functioning successfully and has made significant accomplishments or received significant recognition. The scenario should be specific to the client's organization and based on earlier discussion with the client.
3. Questions each interviewee should ask the other, focusing on how the organization came to function so successfully in the scenario, and addressing any specific organizational areas,

issues, or services surfaced in earlier discussions.

4. Space on the handout to make notes about the answers to the interview questions.

Identifying Themes

At the end of the interview period, the pairs move to small groups of six persons (or so) and share their discussions. During this small group discussion, the groups identify themes in the responses to each question. The themes are recorded on sticky notes, one theme per note.

The small groups then share their themes with the rest of the large group, round-robin style. The sticky notes are placed on a large wall or other area that all can access and view.

Step 3: Prioritize Goals and Strategies

Once all the themes have been posted for all participants to view, they construct an affinity diagram, sorting the themes into related groups. Once the groups are identified, headers are created by the participants to summarize each area. These headers can be used to develop specific goals, with the included themes becoming strategies.

Most groups identify more goal categories than can typically be worked on at once. The next step is to prioritize the goals. This can be done by multivoting.

If there are few goals, but many strategies, it may be more useful for the group to prioritize among all strategies, or prioritize strategies within each goal, using the process above.

Step 4: Develop Action Plans

Once the goals have been prioritized, the group specifies the actions needed to achieve the top goals. Depending on the number of prioritized goals, the size of the group, and the complexity of the goals, the group

may work as a whole, or may break into small groups, with each group working on a different goal or strategy. For each goal or strategy, the group determines a logical order for tasks needed to accomplish the goal or implement the strategy, and then identifies who will do what when, documenting this in a table, spreadsheet or other planning format. At the end of this step, the group will have the draft of a plan that can be typed up and distributed for review.

Next Steps and Follow Up

Depending on the size of the unit or group doing the planning, the above approach can be completed in one short day (six hours) or several half days. It is not necessary in the first iteration of this process to develop action plans for all goals or strategies – just those with the highest priority. Once the unit develops a plan and begins implementation, monitoring of progress should occur on a regular, scheduled basis, be it quarterly, semi-annually, or annually. As implementation of the highest priority initiatives is completed, the list of remaining initiatives can be updated and reprioritized, based on the current environment, and the new top priority initiatives implemented. At some point, it will be appropriate not just to reprioritize initiatives, but to work through the full *Positive Planning* process again.

References

- Cooperrider, D. L., P.F. Sorenson, D. Whitney, T.F. Yaeger. (2000). *Appreciative Inquiry: Rethinking Human Organization Toward a Positive Theory of Change*. Champaign, IL: Stipes Publishing.
- Hammond, S.A. (1996). *The Thin Book of Appreciative Inquiry (2nd Ed.)*. Plano, TX: Thin Book Publishing.
- Lippitt, Lawrence L. (1998). *Preferred Futuring: Envision the Future You Want and Unleash the Energy to Get There*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

More information on tools such as the affinity diagram, multivoting, and action planning can be found in: The Pennsylvania State University, Office of Planning and Institutional Assessment. (2006). *Innovation Insights #12: Tools for Organizational IMPROVEMENT*. <http://www.psu.edu/president/pia/innovation/>

For more information, contact the Office of Planning and Institutional Assessment at 814-863-8721 or psupia@psu.edu, or visit our Web site: <http://www.psu.edu/president/pia>.

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September 2011

Sample Scenarios and Interview Questions

Planning the move to a new building

It is a year after the move to your new building and offices; a move that also brought your unit together in one building. You have received a lot of positive feedback from your students on your services to them during the past year. You are seeing more teamwork and collaboration among all of the folks in your unit, and internal communication is great – everyone knows what they need to know and when they need to know it.

1. What were the strengths of your work unit and organizational relationships? What worked well in your previous locations and spaces, which you retained and brought with you to the new offices? What were you proud of in your culture and activities there that you have kept in the new offices?
2. What were the things that you were not able to do as well as you would have liked to in your previous locations and spaces that you are now able to do in the new offices and be proud of?
3. How are you serving your students in the new facility? What new resources did you have when you moved in (space, classrooms, technology, etc.) and how are you using those new resources?
4. How are you communicating internally, both formally and informally? What meetings are you having? What new communications resources do you have, and how are you using them? How are you integrating your activities/staff on the first, second, and third floor?
5. How were the folks previously in other buildings integrated into the team as quickly and effectively as possible? What did you keep from the original relationships? How did roles and relationships change? How were these changes facilitated?
6. How are you using your new facility and layout of offices to increase collaboration and teamwork?
7. What challenges were there in the move, and how did you deal with them and resolve them?

Implementing and monitoring a plan

The ABC Department has made significant progress on the goals identified two years ago in the Department's strategic plan. The Department's actions in implementing the plan have been used as a model for other Departments in the College. Looking back over the past two years:

1. How has the ABC Department Strategic Planning Committee been working with the other existing departmental structures and organization to implement and/or monitor progress on the plan? What has the Committee's role been with regard to:
 - Decision making
 - Communication
 - Coordination
 - Information sharing
 - Setting priorities for action items
 - Establishing plans and timelines for action items

2. How did the Committee get information on progress and how and when was it shared with the rest of the Department during the implementation? How were the Action Plans updated during the implementation?
3. How has the status of and progress on the plan been integrated into the routine, day-to-day activities of the Department?
4. What has made membership on the Strategic Planning Committee productive, satisfying, and worth your time?
5. Administratively, how much of your time has membership on the Strategic Planning Committee taken? What are its meetings like? How often does it meet face to face? What other means of sharing information and making decisions has it been using?
6. What else has made the Committee effective?

Enhancing alumni relations

You are part of the team going to the upcoming annual National Alumni and Development Association (NADA) conference. Your Alumni Society has been selected as one of the top few in the United States and your team will be doing a presentation explaining what you have been doing and how you have been doing it for the past four years. Your team has been asked to address the topic areas below. Your team is starting preparation by getting together in small groups to gather the following information.

Alumni Support	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How do you communicate with alumni? 2. What activities do you sponsor at the main campus? 3. What activities do you sponsor at other locations (e.g. regional campuses, facilities owned by others, or travel)? 4. How do you measure your success?
College and University Relationships	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. With what other units within your college do you have relationships, and how do you manage them? 2. With what other university units outside your college do you have relationships, and how do you manage them? 3. How do you measure your success?
External Relationships	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. With what other units outside your university do you have relationships, and how do you manage them? 2. How do you measure your success?
Student Recruitment	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What activities and programs do you run (when, where) to support student recruitment? 2. What activities and programs run by others (when, where) for student recruitment do you support? How? 3. How do you measure your success?
Student Support, Retention, and Recognition	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How and when do you communicate with enrolled students? 2. What activities and programs do you run (when, where) to retain and recognize students? 3. What activities and programs run by others (when, where) to retain and recognize students do you support? How? 4. How do you measure your success?

